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Tuition program spurs 'blame game' session

Union: County should not have approved police for training classes

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County unions say mismanagement — not employee abuse — resulted in employees using taxpayer money to attend training and classes that had little to do with improving their job performance.

It was up to Human Resources to root out courses that were not appropriate, said Marc Zifcak, president of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 35, the county police union.

Human Resources Director Joseph Adler said that "additional oversight is needed for the program." The county already has taken steps to ensure that further waste does not occur, he said.

Montgomery County Council members met Thursday to discuss a recent report from the county's Inspector General indicating that more management oversight was needed to head off the questions of fraud, waste and abuse that have become synonymous with the county's Tuition Assistance Program.

At the meeting, blame shifted among the county's Office of Human Resources, Ethics Commission, unions and employees.

"Today was all about the blame game," council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said of Thursday's joint committee meeting.

The Tuition Assistance Program, which is now the focus of county and federal investigations, has been in the spotlight since it was revealed last year that police officers were using taxpayer money to attend training where they received deeply discounted guns.

Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring described the program as having "egregious issues."

"Even if it's a benefit, it's obvious that what's in place was not working, and it was wide open for fraud and abuse," she said.

Members of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 35 have had some form of tuition assistance for 40 years, Zifcak said.

From the start, police officers have been eligible only for accredited academic courses, not job training courses, like the police training courses that launched the investigation of the county program, he said.

"Once people started getting [tuition assistance], more people applied," he said.

The county filed a lawsuit March 3 to recoup money that went to the program.

Since the controversy arose, County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) suspended the reimbursement program. It was reinstated as of Dec. 15, but only for members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994, Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, who agreed to oversight changes.

The county spent about \$2.4 million on 3,467 training courses for about 1,465 employees from fiscal 2007 through Sept. 4, 2009, according to a March report from Inspector General Thomas J. Dagley.

Leggett's fiscal 2011 budget proposal does not fund the program.

While an internal audit and even a federal investigation continue into the program, Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park questioned why new procedures were needed.

He said the solution was simply better management, and the safeguards already are in place to protect the fund from abuse.

If employees request tuition money to take a course not related to their jobs or future jobs, they should be told to "go away and take another class," Elrich said.

"Somebody could have looked at these requests and said no," he said.

A review of the program found employees were improperly reimbursed to take courses in fitness, the Bible and crafts.

"Faith-based programs and gun programs should have been caught," Elrich said.
"Somebody did something wrong."

He said a simple fix would be to call course providers and get a description of the courses; it should be obvious that some courses should not be considered.

"If someone wants to take a class in lily sniffing and how it improves my self-esteem," no phone call is needed, Elrich said.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda said the council will continue to take up the issue of the embattled Tuition Assistance Program and is awaiting an internal audit report.